
# The need for a consumer-led approach to tackle climate change

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the need to get action and reaction to the threats of climate change to be founded on consumers, and in particular to be driven by knowledgeable consumers who take the right decisions for the planet, and their pockets.

This approach will ensure that all organisations (businesses, farmers etc.) that support consumers will "behave" in the right way to address climate change.

## 2. The Current Background

An article produced by the London School of Economics in 2020[1] examined the UK population and produced data that examined the different types of peoples' opinions with respect to climate change, and their views of whether the action being taken was sufficient. They summarise this in the following table:

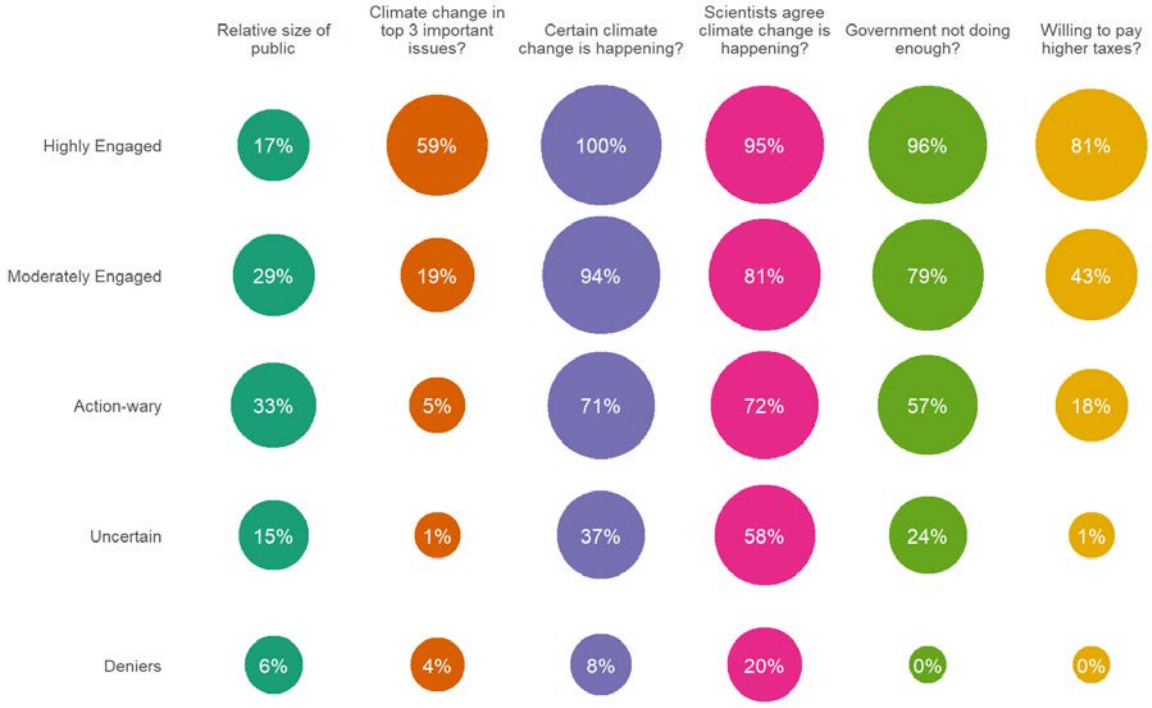


*Figure 1 Climate opinions of the five UK Publics: LSE 2020*

[1] The public's climate change views: strong beliefs but low salience. London School of Economics Jan 10th 2020: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/uk-climate-change-views/

Thus, about half of the population (46%) is highly engaged in the issue of climate change (top two). Not surprisingly they are sure that climate change is happening.

More than 80 % of these people think that the government is NOT doing enough about climate change.

The same paper asked the question of whether people thought climate change was amongst their top 3 issues, (compared with health care, education, crime, immigration, the economy, terrorism, and poverty).

Only 7 % thought it was the most important issue. In fact, only 10% of the population is highly engaged and thinks climate change is the most important issue.

Given the "competition" of those issues, one might think that it was tough to call climate change as being that important. But the rest are largely irrelevant on a planet beset by the existential threat of the outcomes of fires, floods, and famine from climate change.

The UK government has a strategy enshrined in the 2008 Climate Change Act. The Climate Change Act commits the UK government by law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 100% of 1990 levels (net zero) by 2050.

This strategy was found in July 2022 to be illegal, and it was accepted by the government that it was illegal in September 2022. It is illegal because it fails to contain the required detail on required action as set out in the act.

A report from an organisation called Zero Hour shows that the strategy also has a number of obvious holes in it[2], as follows:

- It ignores the considerable amount of carbon dioxide emissions as a result of what we buy from places like China and India, which are responsible for a large amount of harmful Greenhouse Gas (GHG) global emissions. They represent 40 % of the total emissions, for which we are responsible.
- The oil and gas industry is "subsidised" to the extent of £ 10bn per annum, through investment incentives etc.
- The government has not adopted targets for the reduction of meat consumption as part of diets, and as food forms around 20 % of our personal footprint, the strategy misses out on a significant area which should be tackled.

[2] Net Zero - The Ambition Gap https://www.zerohour.uk/reports

## 3. Where is the problem?

If we look at where our emissions occur in the UK, then we can go to a table as follows, produced by the government's BEIS department for 2020:

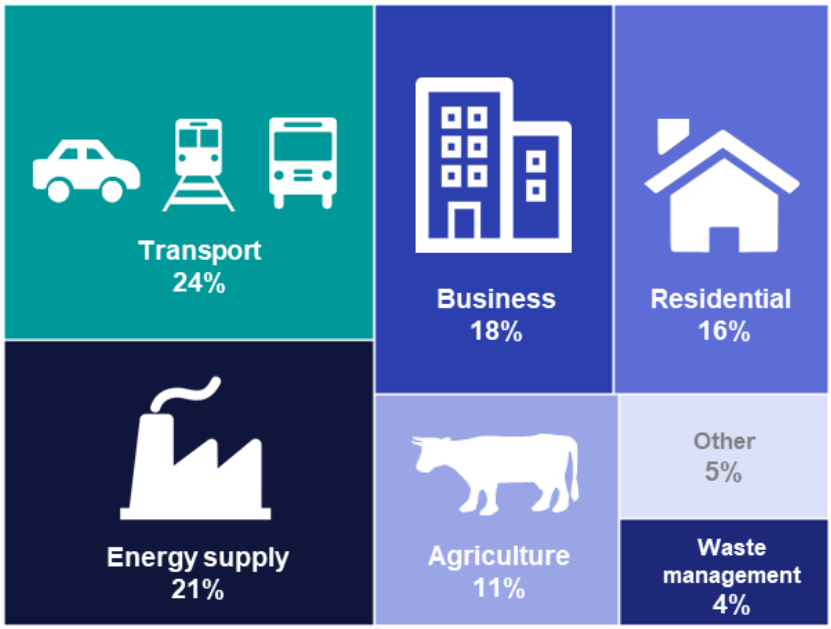


*Figure 2 2020 Emissions of Greenhouse Gases by sector - Dept of BEIS*

This shows that (of the emissions made in the UK, and thus excludes imported goods) transport is the highest emitting sector, followed by business, residential etc. It is perhaps worth noting that residential excludes electricity used in houses for heating, as this is included in "Energy Supply".

There are slightly smaller sectors like Local Authorities, which account for a total of 2 % of emissions, which do not figure in the above figure.

The conclusion, however, of this analysis might therefore be that we need to address the problem by tackling each of these sectors in turn. Around 36 million people lived in households which owned a car in 2020. Therefore, we need to encourage those 36 million people to move away from petrol and diesel cars to electric or hybrid cars.

There are around 5.6 million businesses in the UK, of which 1.4 million have employees. 99 % are small businesses. There are 35,900 medium-sized businesses (50-249 employees) and 7,700 large businesses (250 or more employees). Hence, we might need an approach to get all businesses to reduce their greenhouse gas consumption. Work is underway to ensure that businesses do in fact declare their GHG emissions, and specify whether it is Scope 1, Scope 2 or Scope 3 etc. Scope 1 is emissions they create

in their process (though operating equipment). Scope 2 relates to emissions as a result of the oil and gas they buy. Scope 3 relates to CO2 emissions across their supply chain (much more complex to calculate).

There are about 28 million households in the UK, which covers the residential sector. Hence the challenge is to persuade householders to reduce their consumption and emission of Greenhouse Gases, by altering their dieting, purchasing and travel habits (but note again food is not part of the strategy).

Within the energy sector, then the task is to persuade Oil/Gas/Coal/Nuclear and power distribution companies to reduce the consumption/emission of oil and gas and make a wholesale move towards “renewable” sources of energy such as wind, solar, hydro and the like.

Agriculture covers around 92,000 farmers in 2022, covering all sorts of different sectors including livestock, arable and so on. The task is to get each of these farmers to adjust their farming methods to reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions, install solar electricity and use less fertiliser.

Looking at the task in this way across broad sectors in principle shows why it is such a complex task to bring about change in the emission and consumption of GHGs. People do not want to give up their existing car travel patterns. Energy companies have vested interests in their assets of oil and gas. Many farmers like their preferred form and methods of farming and so on.

However, if we look at this another way, and more as a global “supply chain” then there is another approach. The following is an illustration of the fact that we in the UK as consumers buy products and services which can be made in China, and then shipped to a warehouse and then delivered to us as the end consumer. We also control their

*Figure 3 Global Supply Chain*

destruction. Consumer demand drives the product or service from ground to ground, from farm to plate etc.

If we take that a step further, then there are a number of inputs across the whole supply chain, through mining, manufacturing, distribution and consumption. With services, then there can be a similar series of inputs across a supply chain. Thus, we can look at the food supply chain as follows:

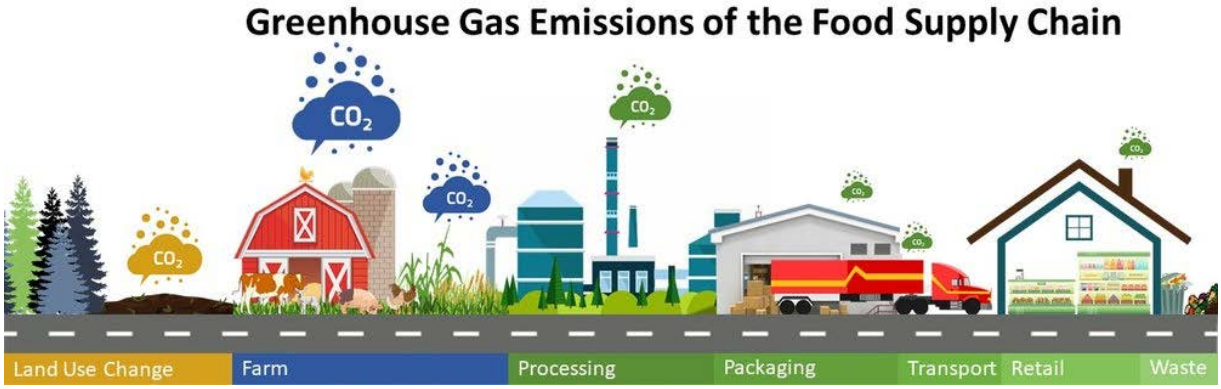


Figure 4 Food supply chain from land to landfill. Source: © www.climategifs.com.

The important part of this diagram is to recognise the fact that there is a consumer in the house at the end of the chain. That person or people create the demand for everything that happens before and after that point. If that person demands to eat meat as part of their diet, then they create the requirements for packaging, processing, farming and the changes in land use.

We can apply similar thinking to the emissions for buildings as in the following diagram:

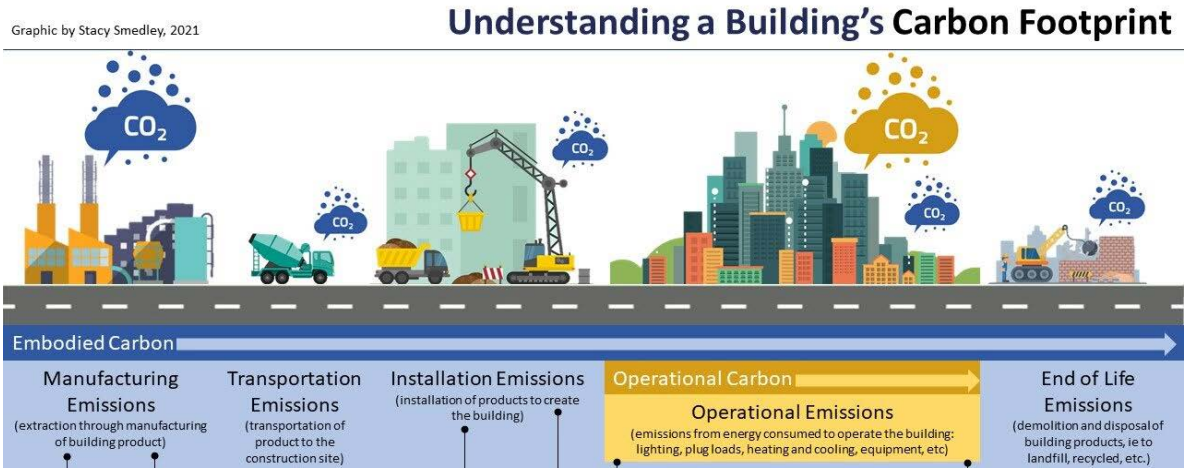


*Figure 5 Building carbon footprint Source: © www.climategifs.com*

If we then think further that "consumers" of money, insurance etc. in turn create services like banking, insurance, and estate agency, we will recognise that "consumers"

ultimately exercise control over the demand for buildings, power stations, farms, and factories.

Hence, we should not look at trying to undertake the complex process of persuading different sectors to change their ways of working. If all consumers were persuaded to demand products and services that were free from emissions of Greenhouse gases, then we would eliminate the problem of Greenhouse gas emissions everywhere.

More importantly, trying to drive climate change by encouraging businesses to adopt different ways, helping farmers to change their farming practises, building electric charging stations etc., runs the risk that this supply-led approach will not be balanced by the actual demand from consumers. A supply-side approach will then inevitably lead to the project becoming a white elephant. If nobody buys electric cars, then there could be a huge amount of redundant charging points. There will also not be the "economies of scale" that are needed to bring down the costs of all the equipment which people will need.

If your objection to all of this is that this idea would need all consumers to understand the impact of their actions on Greenhouse gas emissions and that they would also need to change their purchasing behaviours to ensure that no one along the supply chain caused harmful emissions, then I would agree. You could also think that it will not be possible for consumers to understand all this. But that is just a cynical comment.

That is where the power of education comes in. As Nelson Mandela famously said, *"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."*

Education is the act of not only imparting information and facts from one person to another but also ensuring the change of behaviour and activities of human beings. With respect to behaviour, all human beings need to understand first the answer to the question "Why?" before they will embark on any process of change in their lifestyles. With COVID-19 changes to laws, ways of living, and coping with incredibly difficult situations was made possible because everyone understood why. There were still some "deniers" but sufficiently few. Most trusted the science, and we sped up the drug creation process phenomenally. We can change if we need to.

The problem with change lies with the people, and the solution lies with people as consumers.

## 4. Power of the people, by the people for the people

Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg speech to honour the soldiers stated that he wanted to honour those that sacrificed their lives in order "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" in 1863.

It was clearly a very powerful speech and illustrated the basic value of democracy. But its fundamental premise is that the will of the people is at the heart of a democracy.

Various forms of government exist around the world from autocracy, and tyranny, to democracy. We can all take views as to how effective the different forms of government

are. But all ultimately, are different ways of managing the daily lives of people within a society.

From time to time there have been radical changes to forms of government. In the United Kingdom, we had a revolution with the English civil war, which was a battle that led to the execution of Charles I. In France, the French revolution occurred between 1789 and 1799 and led to the execution of many of the aristocracy, and the advent of a Republic. In 1917 the Russian revolution resulted in the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of a communist state.

So different styles of leadership and government do change. Different countries will need to use their particular form of governmental institutions to respond to the requirements for change. A strict autocracy can tell people to change, and force that through. We saw that with some countries with COVID-19.

The same is true now with climate change. Each country will have to adopt and adapt its approach to fit its style of governing. The difficulty with a democracy (but also a virtue) is that a large majority of people need to be convinced that they need to change. Figure 1 shows that as of 2020 this is not the case.

The fundamental changes which are required in our lifestyles are related to ensuring that everything we do does not depend on any activity which causes the emissions of Greenhouse Gases. Thus, we should reduce the amount of meat we eat in our diet, we should travel using bicycles and electric cars, and stop travelling by plane. We should reuse what we buy. We should insulate our houses. The challenge is to turn the “should” into “will”.

We could wait for governments to legislate for everything. In the UK the government has legislated to stop the sale of diesel and petrol cars, and gas boilers for heating. However, legislators will only respond by passing laws on the issues where they can get agreement for the people, and by the people.

We need, for instance, to ensure all houses use air-source heat pumps and solar panels. But today builders will not include those because they do not have to by law. However, if people insisted that the houses that they bought had as standard (much the same as a kitchen) an electric vehicle charger, an air source heat pump and solar panels, and would not buy them if they did not, then builders would be forced to install them. We could wait for legislators to change planning legislation, but it is obvious that this will not happen in the short term, without a Covid-19 level of sense of urgency being established. So, we need to convince the majority of the people to insist on those changes for the people.

People will only buy electric cars if they believe they are affordable. There is a grant/tax incentive towards buying cars, but arguably not enough to encourage people to switch. That also just covers new cars. There are currently around 33 million cars in the UK. All of those have to be changed in the next eight to ten years.

Around 20 million houses need to be insulated. There are small grants available to do this. But it requires the people who live in those houses to:

1] Recognise that there is a fundamental need to get their houses insulated

2] Arrange to get their houses insulated (and there needs to be the infrastructure to support that!) whether they own it or whether they rent it. Landlords may need to be persuaded.

Hence, there is a fundamental requirement that all consumers understand thoroughly the issues behind climate change, why they should take action, and then make those changes in their lifestyles, which will in turn bring about the required revolution across the whole supply chain – better described as a demand chain. The power rests with the people.

Figure 1 showed that only 17 % of the UK population is currently highly engaged in Climate Change. We need at least 80 % if not 100 % to be highly engaged.

We should not expect the government to do it all or the local authorities. They should respond to what people want. But people need the education to ensure that they get engaged and create a consumer-led revolution in the way we live our lives.

That is why we like the phrase from Herbert Spencer “The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.”

However, more than that, people will only really make the changes required if they could see the benefits of the change to them. All those involved in trying to engage the community in making lifestyle changes need to show consumers that the benefit to the planet is not something remote – like ice caps melting in the arctic, and polar bears swimming in the swelling blue oceans.

Good selling rests on the principle of identifying the benefits to a consumer, and not the features. Those benefits can be very powerful if, for instance, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis taking action on the impacts of climate change will benefit people’s cost of living. It is a powerful answer to the question “Why?”. That is why we show in our education the benefits to people to their pockets as well as the planet.

Having our own renewable energy will also mean foreign countries with different political aims cannot hold us to ransom in their own homes.

In any community, we may look to appointed/elected leaders to provide vision and direction.

However, leadership ultimately must come from the people within a community.

**Education is the force that will ensure that the earth of the people will not perish because of the actions taken by the people for the people**.